



INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

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INTRODUCTION

Inquiry into higher education curricula or, what is sometimes referred to in a broader sense as 'the curriculum' in higher education, is a complex business. One important reason for this is that higher education institutions operate in increasingly super-complex environments (Barnett 2000, 2003, 2011) while the very idea of 'the curriculum' is unstable and its boundaries vague (Barnett & Coate 2005). Typical questions that arise on the issue of curriculum inquiry include whether the curriculum is merely confined to intended educational experiences and stated outcomes or whether the hidden curriculum should also be accounted for. What are the external and internal forces exerting pressures on the curriculum? Does the curriculum focus on the actual lived learning experiences of students or does it extend outside of the seminar, the classroom, the tutorial, the laboratory, the library or the computer centre? Does the curriculum have boundaries in terms of its geography, allocated time or responsibility? Where does the institutional concern for the curriculum start and end? Where do issues such as pedagogy, teaching, learning and assessment overlap within or across the curriculum? All of these questions and many others make curriculum inquiry a vast and complex field that cannot be even closely addressed within the confines of a single book.

However, one reason for promoting debate around the issue of curriculum inquiry is that the higher education curriculum is under-researched in South Africa. Ironically, the school curriculum is an area that has attracted much attention lately, but there is a paucity of inquiry into curricula in higher education – both by researchers and practitioners. Issues such as cultural and institutional differences in the curriculum, social justice and change, societal forces impacting on higher education curricula, the generic attributes debate, the impact of student diversity and others have not been well debated and researched. Recently, for example, a *lekgotla* (meeting of elders) on curriculum transformation was convened by the College of Law at the University of South Africa (Dell 2011:1) where the quest for a more 'Afro-centric' curriculum

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was discussed. At this meeting the current minister of Higher Education and Training announced that a 'learning and teaching charter' is on the cards to address, among other issues, whether higher education curricula are sufficiently relevant to the South African context and the African context in general.

Obviously, there are many reasons for the paucity in curriculum research, one being the merging of a number of higher education institutions in the past number of years, which accounts for consuming the time of academics and researchers, as many will be able to tell. Other reasons include continuous societal and institutional transformation, an emphasis on student access and success, enrolment management and strategies for financial sustainability, institutional survival and well-being. Indeed there were and still are many issues and factors that lure higher education institutions, academic units and academics away from taking a hard look at curricula. Of course there have been exceptions such as in health sciences, engineering and accounting, where professional bodies and councils demanded serious investigation into the curricula of professional programmes, as well as more recent exercises by the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) where qualifications in management (MBA programmes) and education (teacher education programmes in particular) were scrutinised. In general, however, it is only lately that the curriculum in higher education has become an area of serious inquiry and publicising the results.

INQUIRING OR ENQUIRING THE CURRICULUM?

Some language puritans might ask why the term 'inquiry' as used in this book and in relation to investigating curricula is preferred. It may therefore be necessary to get the semantics out of the way before proceeding.

While the terms 'inquiry' and 'enquiry' are often used interchangeably, there seems to be a difference between the two, which provides a good reason for us to prefer the former term in this book. Apparently, the term 'enquiry' means to ask a question, while 'inquiry' refers to a formal investigation (see <http://www.differencebetween.net>). Another difference lies in the etymological source of the prefixes 'en' and 'in'. The former comes from the French, denoting an informal position while the latter is from the Latin, denoting a more formal position. This distinction is underscored by Fowler's (1926) guide to English usage, which indicates that 'inquiry' should be used to a formal inquest, while 'enquiry' refers to the act of (informal) questioning. This distinction is also maintained in other forms of English such as Australian, American and Canadian English (Chambers Twenty-First Century Dictionary 2008).

In spite of a clear distinction in the meaning of the two terms, people seem to use them interchangeably. However, it is more commonly understood that while 'enquiry' represents a request for truth, knowledge or information, 'inquiry' points at a serious investigation into something. We have therefore decided to associate the latter term with investigations into or research conducted in connection with the phenomenon of curricula in higher education.

APPROACHES OR STRATEGIES OF CURRICULUM INQUIRY

Are approaches or strategies to inquire into 'the curriculum' in higher education different from inquiring into other social phenomena? Some authors agree on this question while others differ. Maila (2010:263) for instance, suggests that curricula are determined and guided by knowledge that is perceived as being critical for the advancement of humanity. As progress is often indicated and determined by curricula shaped in the ways of knowing of the dominant cultural group or languages that have achieved hegemonic status, the processes of inquiring into the curriculum seem crucial. The aim of inquiry in such instances may rather be emancipation than discovery or freeing societies from dominant knowledge than improving its impact. One side of the argument is therefore that curriculum inquiry presents a special case that might differ from other types of inquiry.

Williams and McNamara (2003:367), in contrast, acknowledge the curriculum as being part of a contextual, cultural or disciplinary history and they contend that it should be treated as an object of inquiry as such; curriculum inquiry is therefore something of universal interest to all curriculum scholars. The main concern for inquiry in this case would be with issues such as low achievement, improved pedagogy, assessment strategies or other curriculum-related issues. The view we take in this book is that curriculum inquiry in higher education does not differ substantially from researching other social phenomena and therefore curriculum researchers may use methodologies and methods of inquiry that, as in other areas of social inquiry, are compatible to the research problems and questions under scrutiny. The work of Creswell (2009) provides useful guidelines for adopting appropriate research methods in curriculum inquiry that align with particular strategies of inquiry and the philosophical worldviews adopted.

For details on Creswell's stand on appropriate methodology for inquiry into social phenomena the reader is referred to his work. However, what we would like to briefly point out here is the fact that philosophical positioning will inevitably influence the mode and methods of inquiry of any curriculum project. Creswell (2009:6) refers to at least four such philosophical positions or world views (also called paradigms or 'basic sets of beliefs that guide actions') to be aware of, namely post-positivist, constructivist, advocacy/participatory or pragmatic positions. In each case the position taken is largely determined by the aim of an inquiry – in this case, inquiry into the curriculum. For instance: working from a post-positivist paradigm results in empirical observation and measurement or verification of curriculum theory; a constructivist position would provide for deeper understanding, multiple participant understandings or social/theory construction; an advocacy/participatory position would probably render political, empowerment or change-oriented results, while a pragmatic position would be more problem-centred, pluralistic and oriented to real-world curriculum practices. Our aim here is not to provide a tutorial on research methodology but merely to point out that curriculum research, as in other forms of social inquiry, rests on paradigmatic choices – something of which the curriculum inquirer should be acutely aware.

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THE SUBTITLE: AFFIRMATIONS AND CHALLENGES

As a subtitle for this book we have chosen a phrase containing the terms 'affirmations' and 'challenges'. The term 'affirmation' is derived from the Latin word *affirmare* which means 'to assert'. It points to a declaration that something is true or has been verified. The term 'challenge', on the other hand, points to an instigation or antagonisation to convince someone to perform an action they would otherwise not. It thus implies a difficult task, but in many instances a task that the person making the attempt finds more enjoyable because of that difficulty (see Sykes 1984; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiktionary>).

Much of this book has to do with these two issues: affirming what we already know about curriculum inquiry (however, some of the reviewers felt that we have moved beyond affirming curriculum knowledge and should rather refer to 'opportunities taken') and exploring the challenges of what might to come. Both of these issues are important since it seems to be of as much value to know where you come from and where you are, than to know where you might be going. Both these positions are covered in the content of the book, as will hopefully emerge from the contributed chapters. Some chapters focus obviously on affirming what we know, while others focus on the challenges ahead of us, and still others on both of these issues. The main concern of the book, however, is with curriculum in higher education as an object of inquiry. A few introductory remarks on this important phenomenon might be useful.

WHY THE HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM AS A FOCAL POINT?

The decision to focus this book on the curriculum in South African higher education was driven by the fact that although there are intense debates about the strong forces that are currently shaping the curriculum in higher education – particularly in South Africa – very little has been published on this topic. The extent of the influence of these forces and debates on the curriculum is co-determined by the context and nature of a particular university – which means, in the South African context, any of the 23 public universities. Some of these debates are highlighted below.

The debate around what the orientation of a university could be is indicated by Coate (2009) when she asks whether the regional, national or international concern should be the main focus of curricula. Botha (2009) also indicates some dimensions of this debate in her discussion of the internationalisation of the university as compared to its localisation – in South Africa localisation often points to being situated on the African continent. Many South African universities are wrestling with identifying the most appropriate balance or focus in this regard, especially against the background of the skills shortage in the country on the one hand and the pressure to internationalise and globalise on the other.

The demands of the world of work also contribute to the shaping of the higher education curriculum in South Africa. The work of Donoghue (2008) refers to a move away from an 'ivory tower image' towards greater responsiveness to the needs of

society and to the utilitarian ideal. Some disciplines that do not serve this purpose are deemed to be of no use to society and are struggling to survive – some have lost the struggle or have made drastic changes. For example, philosophy and history departments have been closed down or merged with others at some South African universities. Virkunen, Markinen and Lintula (2010) contend that the world of work needs increasingly deeper specialisation, which has an impact on university curricula in particular. Partesan and Bumbuc (2010) have contributed to this debate by stating that the purpose of higher education is inevitably to improve students' chances to enter the world of work, therefore skills that are useful to society should be taught at universities. This is particularly relevant in a country such as South Africa where the unemployment rate of the 18 to 25 age group is close to fifty per cent.

The role of the workplace in co-determining the South African university curriculum also manifests in the need for a particular mix of curricula in comprehensive universities as compared to the curricula of a university of technology and research-oriented universities. The curriculum needs of comprehensive universities are discussed extensively by Muller (2008), while Botha (2009) points to the debate around whether such institutions should focus on a vocational or a liberal curriculum.

Barnett and Coate (2005) have already pointed out that the university needs to link to society through engagement with external non-academic communities as well. This is highlighted again by Coate (2009) when she refers to the need for civic engagement. Also, the university curriculum as an instrument of promoting social justice and transformation has been highlighted in literature (Jansen 2009; Terwel & Walker 2004; United Nations 2010) and has manifested in South African universities in the form of strategic restructuring (Smart 2008) and, in some cases, curriculum change (Hannon, Baron & Hsu 2006; Isern & Pung 2007).

The powerful influence of information technology on the university curriculum (UNESCO 2008) manifests in blended learning, which has been suggested as a useful strategy for serving more students. It therefore contributes to debates around curricula serving mass education compared to selective education, as well as contact teaching compared to distance education (Botha 2009). Similarly, Coate (2009) has pointed out the need for new curricular spaces which could be enhanced by the increased use of information and communication technology.

What is an exciting feature of this book is that most, if not all, of the above-mentioned debates are touched upon in some way or another in its various chapters. This emphasises the importance and potential impact of these debates, factors and forces on curriculum inquiry and development in South African higher education. We shall therefore briefly refer to the structure of the book and the different chapter contributions to illustrate the point.

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THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK

Part One, which is titled *Revitalising curriculum inquiry – Perspectives of researchers*, contains a number of potentially useful perspectives on curriculum inquiry into higher education in South Africa. In the *opening chapter*, Bitzer provides a brief overview of documented curriculum research in South African higher education conducted prior to and beyond the dawn of the post-1994 democratic era in South Africa. Factors that have impacted on curriculum planning and inquiry in higher education are highlighted and a contextual framework is suggested for understanding and further exploring higher education curricula.

In *chapter two*, Du Toit points to various viewpoints reflected in literature as to what the concept 'curriculum' entails. The definitions of the concept of *curriculum* are underscored by various forces that bring their influence to bear on inquiring and developing curricula. From these theoretical perspectives different curriculum types and frameworks emerge which serve as a useful platform for curriculum inquiry. Le Grange enriches the theoretical perspectives emphasised in Du Toit's chapter by pointing out in *chapter three* that in formal education the term 'curriculum' was first used with reference to the university rather than the school. Today, however, most debates on curriculum make reference to school education rather than higher education. Given the complex set of forces (both global and local) that influence what knowledge is included or excluded in university learning programmes, he finds it fitting to reflect on four prominent challenges for the higher education curriculum in contemporary South Africa. Links and sentiments to Sue Clegg's arguments on dominant curriculum discourses in higher education in the UK (see Clegg 2010) seem quite prominent in this chapter.

It is common knowledge that universities in South African higher education represent different organisational types. In *chapter four*, Shay, Oosthuizen, Paxton and Van de Merwe indicate how the establishment of the comprehensive university in South Africa (mainly as a result of the merging of a traditional university and a former technikon), as one organisational type, raises a number of challenges – both practical and conceptual. Comprehensive universities have had to offer both general formative qualifications typically associated with universities and vocational qualifications typically associated with technikons without any principled basis for differentiation, progression or articulation. Drawing on the work of the South Africa Norway Tertiary Education Development (SANTED) project at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, this chapter offers a conceptual framework for knowledge and curriculum differentiation. They apply the framework to the analysis of a number of curriculum cases in order to expose the selection and sequencing of educational knowledge, with a particular focus on differentiation between diploma and the degree. Based on these findings, this chapter proposes a set of provisional principles for curriculum design, progression and articulation.

With *chapter five*, Adam and Cross contribute to debates about curriculum reform in the humanities by reflecting on the findings of a case study of a faculty of humanities at one of South Africa's leading higher education institutions, Wits University. They focus on emerging trends in curriculum reform and reflect on its implications for knowledge production in the humanities by asking and addressing three key questions: (1) What are the drivers of curriculum change? (2) What are the emerging curriculum trends and strategies? and (3) How does this influence knowledge conception?

The first section of the book concludes with Luckett's contribution in *chapter six* by drawing on critical/social realist theory in order to develop a conceptual framework for a research design for curriculum inquiry. Luckett first sets out a philosophical framework based on critical realism, which she claims is compatible with Bernstein's pedagogic device. She then shows how a research design might be developed on the basis of this theoretical platform to address a pressing curriculum issue in the humanities at the University of Cape Town, a research-intensive South African university. It is argued that the goal of an adequate methodology for curriculum research is to reveal how individual agency is mediated by social structuring and cultural conditioning that set up situational logics in particular institutional contexts.

Part Two, titled *Challenges in reconceptualising undergraduate and postgraduate education*, points towards inquiry into a number of emerging curriculum issues. *Chapter seven* focuses on how intercultural issues related to curricula in higher education could be researched. To facilitate this explication, Botha points out how university campuses across the world are increasingly becoming populated with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Universities need to inquire into and create curriculum spaces where relations between members of different cultures are regulated by negotiation and creativity. In order to stimulate thought, debate and further research in this area, this chapter explores the concepts of multi- and intercultural education as a curriculum issue, characterises strategies for infusing interculturalism into the curriculum, highlights some trends in recent intercultural curriculum inquiry and indicates some challenges and directions for future research.

In *chapter eight*, Bitzer explores theoretical contributions from Max-Neef, Bernstein and Gibbons, mainly to foreground two key concepts in curriculum inquiry: trans-disciplinarity and curriculum spaces. It suggests that both concepts are under-researched in curriculum planning. A case study, involving a cross-faculty coursework master's programme in Health Sciences Education, and in particular the module Curriculum Analysis in Health Sciences Education, is used to explore 'weak' and 'strong' trans-disciplinarity and Bernstein's relational curriculum theory of 'strong and tight' versus 'weak and loose' disciplinary or knowledge boundaries. Several epistemological questions regarding cross-faculty curriculum inquiry and development in postgraduate courses are raised and pointers are provided for possible improved future curriculum design in joint coursework master's programmes.

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In *chapter nine* Garraway attests that curriculum inquiry in more applied or professional fields in South African universities has mostly been dominated by Bernsteinian-derived approaches to different forms of knowledge. Therefore, more socio-cultural systems approaches to curriculum inquiry are less well known. This chapter examines activity theory as a curriculum inquiry tool and suggests how it may be used at different levels of analysis. It suggests that activity theory can be used to expose and develop points of difficulty between the different elements that together contribute to curriculum development.

In respect of the issue of literacy in the curriculum, Leibowitz sets *chapter ten* within the current focus on graduate attributes and the attention to what are referred to as 'generic skills'. These are skills that students require in order to study at university, as well as – and more typically – the skills or attributes that students require in order to graduate as competent and meaningfully engaged members of society. The particular subset of skills on which the chapter focuses covers approaches to inquiring academic literacy, broadly understood as encompassing writing and reading, digital literacy, and information literacy. This chapter argues for the significance of a 'new literacy studies approach' and traces the implications of this approach for curriculum inquiry and design.

The university curriculum as institutional transformation is an issue addressed by Hay and Marais in *chapter eleven*. The key argument here is that transformation at higher education institutions are not prioritised unless institutional planners and practitioners conceptualise such programmes and initiatives as falling within or adding value to institutional imperatives. The authors argue that higher education institutions will therefore have to rely on fundamental changes within the institution as a whole, and not on a superficial restructuring in an attempt to accommodate political and social demands. They point out how transformation processes at higher education institutions in South Africa have challenged traditional approaches to education and how inquiring the curriculum is increasingly challenging the fundamental assumptions upon which academic staff conceptualise and construct their curricula.

As the only non-South African contributor, Grant shifts the attention in *chapter twelve* to the fact that not much has been written about 'curriculum' in supervised research education. But as evidenced by the now ubiquitous master's and doctoral student profiles there is a curriculum – and in more than one sense. Most obviously, there is the formal body or bodies of knowledge that must be explored and critically engaged with. Grant points to the range of more or less hidden – or intelligible – processes that mould the research student into a recognisable scholar/researcher/advanced professional. There is the expectation, at least at doctoral level, that the student will produce an original insight or finding, in other words redefine the existing boundaries of curriculum. Problematically, however, curriculum is always shadowed by a productive tension between ignorance and knowledge and in the context of research education, under certain circumstances, this tension may become overbearing for

either supervisor or student or both. Curriculum is also indubitably political – certain forms of knowledge and subjectivity are hegemonic and others are excluded. In post-colonial countries such as South Africa and New Zealand, there are significant challenges to the dominant Western curriculum from students who do not identify with the knowledges and subjectivities produced there and who seek supervisors to support them in producing other kinds of knowledges and selves. Here Grant clearly links to the chapter by Botha on the recognition of cultural diversity in the curriculum and suggests some theoretical and practical responses to inquiring dilemmas arising from contested graduate research programmes.

Part Three of the book, *Methods for interrogating, revisioning and implementing curriculum change*, comprises some exemplary contributions on inquiry methods in use. It starts with *chapter thirteen* in which Beylfield suggests that curriculum inquiry represents a continual quest to change for the better. Action research methods seem to be one way in which the curriculum can be interrogated in order to create links between reflective practice, organisational learning and quality education. The chapter elaborates on a research process that comprised three action research cycles in the analysis and development of a general skills development module in medical education, with a strong emphasis on assessment and curriculum change. It ends with a reflective account of a thoughtful struggle towards curriculum transformation. Similarly, in *chapter fourteen* Wood offers an equally interesting discussion of curriculum enquiry through the lens of values-based practitioner self-inquiry. Through an explication of the genre of action research, she shows how the iterative learning of the curriculum maker, through processes of scholarly self-inquiry, is used to hold him-/herself accountable for the improvement of both curriculum content and pedagogical practice. She introduces the idea of how the creation of personalised living theories helps to minimise the gap between theory and practice. The notion of values as living standards of judgement is elucidated, demonstrating how practitioners (in, for instance, a teacher education curriculum) can utilise them to ensure that explicit epistemological and ontological principles are embodied in curriculum inquiry and implementation.

Chapter fifteen describes the use of the Delphi method to inquire into how the contents of a curriculum in health sciences could be determined in a participative way. Stefan builds her example around a number of questions such as: How is the health education curriculum developed? What is the value of consulting the actual beneficiaries of the curriculum in order to ensure its continued relevance for medical practice? What does such a study reveal about the adequacy of the curriculum in equipping the beneficiaries for practice? What was learned from an experiment about the ways to optimise the use of Delphi for this kind of application? In the end she points out that such a method of inquiry can add much value to the way in which a curriculum is investigated, reconceptualised and implemented.

Costandius, in *chapter sixteen*, describes curriculum inquiry in a Visual Communication Design module in which she used a case study design to investigate a project called

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‘Citizenship’. She applies complexity theory as a lens to investigate the methodology and processes followed – in this case in an attempt to better understand curriculum complexity. Complexity evolves not only because of a large number of curriculum elements, but because of the relationship between these elements in the curriculum. She describes the characteristics of a complex system such as the Visual Communication Design curriculum to examine the case study methodology used for the Citizenship project, to see how that enhanced the understanding of the process and the context in which the case study was conducted. Using complexity theory in combination with the case study methodology and its impact on the Visual Communication Design curriculum as an example are illustrated.

In *chapter seventeen* Koen refers to curriculum as a ‘plan of action’ that organises learning student activities. The question of accountability features prominently in her attempt to make the curriculum more responsive and successful. The methodology in this case comprised a small-scale classroom research approach in a Life Skills course in a faculty of education towards curriculum renewal. The reported research stresses the importance of inquiring students’ perceptions and experiences of the curriculum; it suggests a theoretical framework whereby small-scale curriculum research might be useful and practical.

Grounded theory methodology (GTM) has been termed a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory. This approach differs from more conventional modes of inquiry in which the researcher chooses a theoretical framework for a study, formulates hypotheses and tests them. It also differs from ‘armchair’ or ‘desktop’ theorising or research that aims to provide descriptive accounts of the subject matter. In *chapter eighteen* Smith-Tolken argues that grounded theory methodology is conducive to curriculum inquiry, because the latter is a process and there is an interaction of actors, which fits GTM well, but it also gives impetus to theorising about the curriculum in a scholarly manner. Drawing on her PhD studies, she demonstrates this by drawing on a study of seven experiential learning modules that included engagement with non-academic communities external to the university.

In *chapter nineteen* Madiba presents curriculum mapping (CM) as a well-documented inquiry process, but points out that the rich conversations that have to be part of such a process might be lost in the tediousness and scope of the work to be covered. However, advances in learning technologies provide new avenues from which curricula can be explored. For example, using a web-based system for curriculum mapping can offer a number possibilities and features to enable curriculum analysis. A system of this nature has to be built – not as a technical tool, but informed by institutional curriculum development agendas that are well thought through, as well as by recognised curriculum principles.

In the *final chapter* of the book, Bester reports on a curriculum review and design research project at a university of technology. The project used a strengths-based

approach namely Appreciative Inquiry, which unleashes a culture of creative and constructive engagement that encourages the development of collaborative learning communities in the institution. As a transformative process based on social constructivism as theoretical framework, it moves away from the deficit-based thinking of 'what is wrong with the curriculum and how do we fix it?' by aligning systems and practices with the institution's generative and creative core. The chapter outlines some of the challenges and tensions related to the recently adopted Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) in South Africa, revising curricula at universities of technology and exploring how Appreciative Inquiry can be used as a change agent in curriculum restructuring and design.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum inquiry in higher education in South Africa is a field within higher educational studies that addresses distinct and important issues, challenges and methodologies related to higher education curricula. These elements tend to transcend the various areas of educational inquiry as they impact upon the design, implementation and evaluation of educational programmes – particularly in universities. They also tend to be holistic and trans-disciplinary, concerned with the interrelationships between various disciplines and significant to epistemological, ontological and methodological issues. Furthermore, curriculum inquirers increasingly tend to investigate the relationship between curriculum, educational practices and the relationship between higher education programmes and the contours of the society and culture in which higher education institutions are located. As few books have been written on curriculum inquiry in higher education and fewer on higher education inquiry in South Africa in particular, this volume will be valuable to both curriculum researchers and academic staff. We also trust that the project was a timely endeavour – particularly during rapid and constant change and transformation in South Africa where academics need to make hard decisions involving sensitivity towards both scholarly and societal concerns.

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